



The Day the Universe Changed: How Galileo's Telescope Changed the Truth

James Burke

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In *The Day the Universe Changed*, James Burke examines eight periods in history when our view of the world shifted dramatically: in the eleventh century, when extraordinary discoveries were made by Spanish crusaders; in fourteenth-century Florence, where perspective in painting emerged; in the fifteenth century, when the advent of the printing press shook the foundations of an oral society; in the sixteenth century, when gunnery developments triggered the birth of modern science; in the early eighteenth century, when hot English summers brought on the Industrial Revolution; in the battlefield surgery stations of the French revolutionary armies, where people first became statistics; in the nineteenth century, when the discovery of dinosaur fossils led to the theory of evolution; and in the 1820s, when electrical experiments heralded the end of scientific certainty. Based on the popular television documentary series, *The Day the Universe Changed* is a bestselling history that challenges the reader to decide whether there is absolute knowledge to discover - or whether the universe is "ultimately what we say it is."

The Day the Universe Changed: How Galileo's Telescope Changed the Truth Details

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Author : James Burke

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Cara says

I didn't like this book because James Burke has a huge underlying bias: There is no real truth. I do agree with his idea that our perspective and beliefs shape the way we see the world, and that science and knowledge of the world influences how we see the world around us. Ironically, the reason I didn't like his book is his own bias against Christianity. Burke seems to portray the idea that since our understanding of the truth is always changing, we cannot rely on our beliefs and that there is no real truth. He talks about the christian belief as an ancient belief that no longer has any place in our enlightened times - this seems to be his whole underlying theme. I am using this book as a reference to show that it is important to get different perspectives on historical event: for, his portrayal of the history of Galileo and Darwin and Luther in their stories with the world and influence on the Church is different than the story given from the Catholic perspective. He applauds Darwin for helping to overcome the lies in the church, so that we could do away with the christian religion altogether. Different Historical accounts will have different things they look at, different viewpoints and biases, so it is good to get many perspectives and accounts. This is a good example of why we should read about different perspectives of historic events in order to get a better picture and make our own judgement.

Susannah says

Burke is a very clear, concise and intelligent writer who carefully chooses the events he believes to be the most signal in changing our understanding of the way the universe works. He ends his book with the thesis that since all facts and information are filtered through the societal understanding of the people who look for and interpret them, truth itself is relative, and the way we understand the universe today is not necessarily the final say. In fact, history would suggest that another change is coming. Supported by examples, though necessarily a top-level view, this book is a terrific overview of how "truth" itself can vary with new discovery and comprehension.

Jim says

The book is a companion to the 1980s BBC series by James Burke, The Day The Universe Changed. Burke episodically walks us through some of the turning points in the development and educational evolution of man. The BBC series (shown on PBS in the 80's) is enlightening, provocative, and very entertaining. The book, however, is dry by comparison, and lacks Burke's personal entertaining style and wit. You can see the BBC series on Youtube; you can also buy the DVD set for home TV viewing, about \$100 but worth it. It used to be available exclusively to educational institutions.

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Todd Gilbert says

this book absolutely changed the way I perceived the Universe and humanity. One of the top three most influential books in my life.

Joseph Carrabis says

There is little doubt (to me) that James Burke is the God of How This Led To That. If you haven't seen or read Connections, add it to your must read/watch list as quickly as you can (and follow up by watching/reading). He followed up Connections with The Day the Universe Changed and it was an equally worthy read and watch.

I do not recommend Connections II and III. Marketing got involved (something Burke even mentioned in an interview).

But *Connections* and *The Day the Universe Changed* are excellent. Want to know how we got computers? Burke shows how an incident in the Fertile Crescent was necessary for computers to exist. Want to know how we got Television? Burke demonstrates how the discovery of Lodestone made it possible.

Read them. Learn. Enjoy!

??? ??? ???? says

John says

I believe this was the companion book to the wonderful PBS Series of the same title hosted by James Burke (in the 1980's). In it, he pinpoints pinnacle points in scientific history that changed the world as we know it (hopefully you weren't reading that last sentence aloud).

What I love most about this book is that Mr Burke understands that no Scientific "discovery" or theory actually drops from a tree like Newton's apple (no matter how tasty that apple is). He does a wonderful job rewinding from the point of "discovery" to illuminate the culture and people who came before to create just the right atmosphere for "discovery" (I swear I'm going to stop putting that word in quotations). He also carries the narrative long after the discovery to show us the effects it's still having on us today.

We are (in many ways) children of these discoveries. We are able to imagine a Universe where Earth is not the center because of men like Copernicus and Galileo, and that notion changes our point of view. More controversially, men like Darwin have shown us a Universe where "Man" is not the center, and this point of view upsets some people so much that they cannot live in such a world (and so deny its existence even to this day).

These are but two examples from the book. I'm always surprised it isn't required reading in all colleges (perhaps it isn't boring enough), but then-- what do I know? Perhaps there are better text books out there. I just can't imagine them.

Justyna Staro?-Kajkowska says

I cannot really tell what is the purpose of this book. If you are ignorant, you won't get any better understanding, besides few anecdotes served on some surreal plate, that will try convince you, that every discovery was just blind luck without any reason (in one place of the book it is even directly stated). If you already have basic knowledge of given subject, you won't get any better information.

It is just quick jumping on various discoveries with uneven attention (indexing is explained in details, but discoveries in physics are barely touched). Huge minus for almost omitting XIX and XX century discoveries (very brief summary of electromagnetism and relativity) and those centuries define our current life.

I understand, the author is not physicist, but feeling that he has no idea, what he is writing about, made me convinced that I am reading some high school essay retyped poorly from Wikipedia. Long sentences, that sometimes lead who-knows where, cut off relations between subjects in the middle of the chapter, I didn't like that.

Last chapter is just pure chaos - it looks like summary of previous chapters, then it moves into "there is no truth" wild assumptions and interpretations, then injects some new discoveries in the end. Weird, looks like unedited notes.

Not worth any minute of your life, unless you want to write a PhD thesis explaining its high rating.

Douglas Bittinger says

I absolutely *love* this book. It may well be the only non-fiction book that I have ever said this about, but I found so much entertainment as well as a wealth of education in it that it deserves this banner. Mr Burke takes historically significant moments - some I knew about and some I didn't - and shows us just how these moments turned the entire Universe of knowledge on its ear. Even if we didn't see it at the time. It is very thought provoking and really opened my eyes to the stodgy way we now think and assume that the "known scientific facts" are irrefutable. What delightful vanity!

Maynard Handley says

Nothing new here.

If you're unfamiliar with the history of science, I guess this is a fairly quick summary. But for anyone who knows anything about this material, there's nothing new here --- no original insights, no unexpected reframing of issues. A reasonable book to give to a friend who wants to know this material, but nothing more than that.

Jason X says

Burke quickly covers a wide period of history, philosophy, religion, and science, hitting mostly highlights. Burke's closing summation is outstanding.

At the close, Burke ties everything together elegantly, leaving the reader with unanswered questions, but still satisfied. I especially connected with his observation that our current structures for explaining reality are limited by contemporary methods, truths, and instruments. That we all live a contemporary truth to be replaced is, to me, a fine place to be. That keeps me hopeful for the future and that the World can be a better place. If Burke's claim that discovery is invention and knowledge is man-made, then we are limited only by our imagination.

Audiobook grade B-. Burke is a fine professorial narrator. Like other Overdrive recordings, there were audio glitches.

Rob Mills says

I had just read *Connections*, so probably just a bit too much James Burke over a two month period. Very interesting stuff, as expected, and a fairly enjoyable read. The last chapter helps contextualise the point he's driving at and I sort of feel I should have read it first! A colleague told me this was a TV series, so perhaps if I had watched it at the same time I would have understood the overall idea a bit better and read more out of all the stories. Important arguments and well documented, important stuff and actually sort of pairs well with *Sapiens/Homo Deus*.

James says

An absolute delight, and a must-have for anyone interested in history, science, or - most importantly - the history of science.

I remember James Burke best from childhood, watching "Tomorrow's World", with its tag-team of Baxter, Burke, and Rodd - a sort of genteel, boffin's equivalent of "Top Gear"'s Clarkson, May, and Hammond. From there, Burke moved on to solo series in which he abstrusely connected different discoveries to show their impact on the modern world. Prior to now, though, I had not read any of his books.

Burke is a supreme populariser of science, and eminently readable, to the point where this book is a real page-turner, with something fascinating on every page. The author's squirrel mind leaps from topic to topic, linking and interweaving them all, so that seemingly isolated events are shown as being part of a giant matrix of cause and effect. His work in making science interesting for both layman and scientist alike places him alongside the great Carl Sagan (not something I say of many writers).

Burke does not shy away from scientific controversies, nor does he suggest that what we now think of as scientific ‘truth’ is totally accurate. In fact, in the book’s final chapter, he goes so far as to point out how much scientific exploration and discovery has been dictated by the social and political mores of the times in which the work took place. He is also frequently equivocal about the good and bad points which science - or more particularly, its adherents - can evoke.

The book is even-handed in its treatment of science and religion to a surprising extent; similarly it does not mock early attempts at understanding the universe by philosophers, soothsayers, and astrologers. The author makes it clear that - although we have progressed far in our understanding - there is nothing which guarantees that our current scientific beliefs are any more true - they are simply the best fit for the evidence. In the final chapter, in fact, he drops the second shoe with his suggestion that our highly vaunted modern science may be no more accurate or definitive than the “sciences” which preceded it - renaissance science, hermeticism, and religion - as all of them have been shaped by the times and culture in which they were created. They become structures on which to hang phenomena, but in order to truly progress, sometimes a structure has to be discarded or adapted, and that can, indeed, change our entire view of the universe.

All in all, for its fascinating passage through history and the philosophy of science, its sheer readability, and the sense of excitement and wonder which the author imparts, the only reason I am giving this book five stars is that it's impossible to give it six. One of the best popular science books I have ever read.

Rihab says

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